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ABSTRACT

This literature review on admission to teacher education programs focuses on: utilization of passing scores on one of the many tests used by licensing agencies as a criterion for admission to teacher education programs; use of personal or group interviews to determine candidates' skill in several crucial areas; and examination of candidates' personal dispositions toward teaching. Personal attributes or dispositions have a range of acceptability to society as a whole, which eventually lead to a judgment by both candidates and assessors as to whether or not the candidates possess the appropriate disposition. The paper asserts that teacher education programs need a model for measuring candidates' personal dispositions, proposing a model with four critical elements: use of multiple screening measures across several time frames by more than one evaluator; use of gating at appropriate places along the path toward program completion; use of professional development plans; and combining the ongoing personal relationship between student and advisor with an evaluative conference with a program administrator. Recommendations include: using transcript data to verify program requirements are met, but not as predictors of teaching performance; using multiple raters and instruments; and requiring candidates to produce written responses to on-demand questions centered on educational issues. (Contains 34 references.) (SM)

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Standards for Admission to Teacher Education Programs

by

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Introduction

Few issues are more complex than the concerns surrounding who should be teachers in our schools. In a time of teacher shortages, alternative so-called “fast track” programs are often seen as one way to fill a nation’s classrooms with licensed teachers. Alternative programs are generally for those people who have undergraduate degrees in a subject area other than teaching. A majority of states now accept alternative programs for teacher licensure (Feistritzer & Chester, 2000). These candidates generally only need teacher education course credits and practice teaching experience to become licensed teachers.

A major question for teacher education program administrators and faculty becomes one of selection. Whom should we select for admission into teacher education programs? Admissions decisions and criteria for entry into teacher education programs in general and alternative programs in particular become critical to the success of the program and to the goal of placing effective teachers in the classrooms of a country or region. If teacher educators can determine the dispositions, knowledge, and skills of preservice teachers who are more likely to be successful in teaching, teacher education institutions and preservice teacher education candidates could maximize their limited time, money, and resources. This paper seeks to review the literature that is available about admission to teacher education programs and to recommend promising practices that program administrators might use to admit candidates to such programs.

Research History & Background

Teacher education institutions have been trying to identify successful preservice candidates for some time (Laman & Reeves, 1983; Pratt, 1986; Sears, Marshall & Otis-Wilborn, 1995; Jablonski, 1995). Only a few longitudinal studies have examined the relationship between program admissions data or scores on teacher tests and later, effective teaching performance (Clary, 1972; Strauss & Sawyer, 1986; Ehrenberg & Brewer, 1995; Haberman, 1995; Sears, Marshall & Otis-Wilborn, 1995; Ackley & Arwood, 1999; Ferguson & Brown, 2000; Ackley, Fallon & Carroll, 2001). None of the preceding studies found that the undergraduate grade point average (GPA) had a direct correlation to effective teacher performance though some researchers (Jabolonski, 1995; Ackley, Fallon & Carroll, 2001) note that GPA may be a predictor of general academic ability. However, "... the possession of a baccalaureate degree and even a major in a particular subject do not assure that a person can explain concepts" (Kennedy, 1989, p.6).

What admissions data can we use to determine which candidates might become an effective teachers? Two studies have found a possible connection between future teaching success and a previous, successful classroom teaching experience in a recreation program, Sunday school, or in a regular classroom as a teacher's aide (Ackley & Arwood, 1999; Ackley, Fallon & Carroll, 2001). Three studies have found a possible connection between future teaching performance and a desire to serve others or society in general (Ackley & Arwood, 1999; Haberman, 1995; Sears et al., 1995). The findings from Ackley et al. (2001) also suggest that there may be a positive connection between a candidate's previous experience coaching young people in sports or academic endeavors and future effective teaching performance.

Therefore, faculty and staff can review admissions data and look specifically for candidates' previous successful classroom teaching experiences with children and/or previous successful coaching experiences with children. We can also ask the candidate and review data submitted by the candidate to try to determine the reasons why a candidate wishes to become a teacher.

Teacher Tests

One of the criteria for admission to a teacher education program might be a passing score on one of the many tests licensing agencies use to determine if they will license a candidate to teach in their state or province. Most states now require teacher candidates to pass some type of an examination to measure teachers' knowledge of basic skills, general knowledge, subject matter knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge (Mitchell, Robinson, Plake & Knowles, 2001). In a review of the role of licensure tests provide for improving teacher quality, the National Research Council discovered that setting high passing scores on the tests most states require for teacher licensure can eliminate competent candidates. Furthermore, setting high passing scores on these tests will also reduce the diversity of the teacher applicant pool (Mitchell et. al., 2001). The National Research Council recommends that states utilize multiple and broad-based measures and indicators for assessing teacher competence over a period of time rather than the one score on a multiple-choice test. There is no question that a teacher should be able to read, write, and compute but the National Research Council study notes that there is little research that indicates a relationship between a score on a teaching examination, teaching performance, and student learning in the classroom (Mitchell et. al., 2001).

Faculty and administrators must make decisions about the place teacher testing will occupy within a program. Some programs require all candidates to pass all the required tests with the exception of the professional knowledge or pedagogical test before anyone will be admitted to the program or before anyone will be admitted into the student teaching experience. Other institutions only require that candidates pass a basic skills test before entry into the program.

Interviews

Thorough admissions procedures can assist program administrators in determining which candidates might be more likely to become successful teachers. The personal or group interview can be an effective way to determine a candidate's skills in several crucial areas (Shechtman & Godfried, 1993; Byrnes, Kiger & Schechtman, 2003). Jablonski (1995) noted that cognitive decision-making and perceptual skills were significant predictors of effective teaching performance. Jablonski also affirmed the importance of the candidate's sense of self-efficacy. The importance of self-efficacy has been noted by other researchers (Featherstone, 1993; Pascarelli, Ackley & Balaban, 2001). The interview is a particularly appropriate place to assess the candidate's cognitive decision-making abilities and sense of self-efficacy.

For example, some researchers (Shechtman & Godfried, 1993; Byrnes, Kiger, Schechtman, 2003) documented the use of the group problem-solving interview at schools of education in Israel and Utah. The process is as follows. A small number of candidates enter a room without knowing anyone. Assessors explain the purpose of the group problem-solving exercise to the assembled candidates who are then left to introduce themselves to each other and determine the steps they will use to accomplish

the task while they are being watched by the team of assessors. After the exercise, the assessors pool their scores on a variety of measures. The group exercise might also be video-taped so the data can be reviewed again at a later time. This data becomes part of each candidate's admissions file.

A personal admissions interview with program faculty can be a most effective tool in determining candidates' verbal and cognitive reasoning abilities. Montclair State University in New Jersey uses eight variables in assessing a candidate's suitability for entry into their teacher education program (Jacobowitz, DeLorenzo & Adirim, 2000). Montclair State faculty complete a Likert scale assessment on each of the eight areas using data gathered from the personal interview and the written information submitted by the candidate. The eight areas Montclair State rates for each candidate are: content knowledge, commitment to teaching, initial commitment to the moral and ethical responsibilities of teaching, personal qualities, written communications, oral communications, and an overall personal and professional judgments by the interview team (Jacobowitz et. al., 2000).

In addition, during the personal interview at Montclair State the candidate must write an essay responding to an educational conundrum. For example, the candidate is to assume that she is a music teacher who must choose between two remaining students for the last available seat on the bus to the state music choir championship. One student is an attentive, serious student who practices diligently but who has trouble maintaining the pitch of his voice. The other student is the most talented tenor you have ever taught but he does not attend class regularly and he antagonizes other students with his arrogant attitude. The candidate is then asked to write an essay explaining the reasons for her

choice and how she intends to explain her choice to the unsuccessful student who does not get to attend the state championship (Jacobowitz et. al., 2000,).

Dispositions toward Teaching

One of the most intriguing areas for research and study is the area of a candidate's personal dispositions toward teaching. Within the field of teacher education, particular dispositions have been identified as critical to effective teaching. These critical dispositions have been undisputedly linked to knowledge and pedagogy. Some researchers (Balzano & Fallon, 2003) have defined a disposition in teacher education as a personal attribute that is manifest as an observable behavior or group of behaviors. Some programs assume a disposition for teaching must be present if the candidate meets all other criteria. Other programs attempt to measure dispositions during the admissions process from a thorough examination of the candidate's written submissions and from the candidate's written and oral responses to questions during a personal interview. For example, Montclair State asks some of the following questions to all candidates to determine a candidate's dispositions about essential teaching attitudes and beliefs.

Please recall your most positive or powerful learning experience. Give a brief description of this experience and share how you might incorporate this experience into your own teaching. 2) Do you think teaching is a political act? Please explain. 3) How would you define democracy? Using your own definition, please explain some ways that you can apply democracy in the classroom. 4) How do you feel about teaching students whose culture, race, or ethnicity is different from your own? If you feel you would be comfortable or uncomfortable, on what past experience is this feeling based? . . . 8) Have you

ever worked as a part of team? Please describe your role. Did you enjoy working in that type of environment? Why? What do you like most and least about working with a team. (Jacobowitz et. al., 2000, p. 9).

Some people and organizations view dispositions as so important that they include dispositions within the core standards of what it means to be a teacher. The teaching standards of the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) includes knowledge, dispositions, and performances in all ten of its basic teaching principles (1992). Some examples of these dispositions are as follows: 1) The teacher appreciates multiple perspectives. 2) The teacher has enthusiasm for the subject she teaches and recognizes connections to everyday life. 3) The teacher is committed to continuous learning and engages in professional discourse about subject matter knowledge and children's learning of the discipline (From INTASC Core Standards, Principle #1, 1992). Dispositions are also a critical, though unstated, element of the standards established by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (1994).

A Model for Evaluating Dispositions

Personal attributes or dispositions have a range of acceptability to society as a whole which eventually lead to a judgment by both the candidate and the assessors as to whether or not you possess the disposition and to what degree (Balzano & Fallon, 2003). Therefore, it is our responsibility as educators to assess in ourselves and teacher candidates the degree to which each critical disposition is present and how to nurture the continual development of the dispositions. We believe that teacher education programs need a model for measuring candidates' personal dispositions. The model we propose has four critical elements. The first element is the use of multiple screening measures

across several time frames by more than one evaluator. Although this element might seem difficult at first glance, the use video recording, computer video applications, and screening interviews could make this element an attainable goal.

The second element is the use of gating at appropriate places along the path toward program completion. For example, the students at Alverno College must complete a teaching portfolio of their professional field experience practice teaching before they can be admitted to the rank of student teacher (Mentkowski, 2000). Using gates provide program administrators and faculty with appropriate mechanisms for providing candidates with feedback about their performance and helping them to set goals in order for them to successfully complete the next stage of the program.

A third element of the model is the professional development plan. At each stage of the program where a student needs remediation of some kind, the student and the program advisor develop a specific plan to correct any areas that need improvement and to highlight the student's strengths and growing abilities. The plan should include goals, objectives, and checkpoints along the way toward reaching the desired goals, activities to assist in the progression, resources and people identified to assist the student, and levels or specific criteria the student must meet before passing on to the next level.

The fourth element is a combination of the on-going personal relationship between the student and the advisor with the addition of an evaluative conference with a program administrator. In some cases, no matter how careful we have been, students are not able to make the kind of progress that is required for the institution to be able to recommend a candidate for licensure to the state agency. Sometimes the circumstances the student faces may change. This element provides a way for the faculty and the

administration to personally engage the student in a directed discussion about the student's performance in relation to the requirements of the program.

One example of a program that has utilized the above elements of the model is a new program in special education at a middle-sized eastern university. This intensive cohort model used the regular application process with three phases of assessment to measure the quality of the potential of teacher candidates. In phase one, three assessors rated the application packet of materials and scaled the quality of each of element submitted by candidates. Phase two was a group interview (Byrnes, Kiger, & Shechtman, 2003) with both oral and written communication requirements. Multiple raters and multiple observers were used in a group interview process. Three oral questions were asked to the group who then dialogued on those topics. Candidates then answered two written, on-demand questions using computers to develop their written responses.

Phase three was a meeting of all of the raters involved in the previous phases. Their purpose was to debrief findings and to make the final selection of the candidates for the special education alternative program.

Plans are underway to follow this cohort through the entirety of their internship experience to gain further insight about the quality of their teaching performance in relation to the admissions data.

Summary and Recommendations

Once we have some conclusive studies about the relationship between admissions standards, teacher testing, teaching performance, and student achievement; teacher educators will have some specific guidelines to use in admitting students to a teacher

education program. Until that time, we teacher educators will have to use the incremental steps we have made to this date. We do know some specific areas we wish to examine in the materials the candidate submits and in the personal and group interviews we conduct prior to our admission of a candidate to our program. Based on the empirical findings to date, we suggest the following approaches (Brouwer, Fallon, Ackley, Sanders, Tillema, 2003) be carefully considered.

- Use transcript data to verify program requirements are met, but not as a predictor of teaching performance.
- Match the program goals and the program's conceptual framework clearly to desired qualities of candidates you wish to accept since qualities of effective teaching are perceived differently.
- Use multiple raters and multiple instruments because it can result in higher reliability and validity.
- Use of a group interview that is centered on educational issues can be a valid requirement for admission assuming the raters/observers are properly trained.
- Require candidates to submit evidence on prior teaching or coaching experiences to verify potential for success in teaching performance.
- Require candidates to produce a written response to on-demand questions centered on educational issues. This response can be one indicator of possible future success in teaching, especially if technology is used in the development of the essay.

After the candidate is admitted, we teacher educators will want to use procedures that are in the best interests of the candidate, the institution, and the children they will teach. The process should be an open one that is based on legally defensible standards applied at specific and appropriate times during the students' program of studies.

We are nearing a time when we will have greater tools to help guide our decisions about admission to our teacher education programs. In the meantime, let us keep the dialogue alive and maintain a research trail that demonstrates a clear path among admission practices, teacher dispositions and performance, and student learning.

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